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XVII.—RECENT TRANSLATIONS OF OLD ENGLISH POETRY.

The desire was expressed some years ago that we might soon have in English a collection of translations of Old English poetry that might fill the place so well filled in German by Grein's *Dichtungen der Angelsachsen*. This desire is now in a fair way of accomplishment, and much has been done during the past ten years, the period embraced in this paper. As was naturally to be expected from the work previously done in criticism of both text and subject-matter, *Beowulf* has attracted more than ever the thoughts and efforts of translators, for we had in 1892 the rhythmical translation of Professor J. Lesslie Hall and the prose version of Professor Earle; in 1895 (reprinted in cheaper form in 1898) the poetical translation of William Morris and A. J. Wyatt, the editor of *Beowulf*; in 1901 the prose version of Dr. J. R. Clark Hall, author of *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*; and only the other day, in 1902, the handy prose version of Professor C. B. Tinker. It could scarcely be expected in the brief space to which this paper is limited¹ that more could be done than merely to scratch the surface of the ground, for

“ I have, God woot, a largē feeld to erē,
And waykē been the oxen in my plough ; ”

therefore I shall attempt nothing more.

Professor Lesslie Hall has based his translation on the Heyne-Socin text, perhaps as good a text as any, though some have preferred Wyatt, but the difficulty under which any translator labors is that there is no consensus as to a standard *Beowulf*-text. A translator of twenty years ago was severely criticised because his translation did not correspond to the text that the critic happened to have in hand, whereas,

¹ Fifteen minutes.

if he had consulted the text of Grein's separate edition of 1867, he might have spared his criticism. The best service to Old English studies that some one of our younger scholars could render would be to publish a variorum edition of *Beowulf*, incorporating all the latest emendations of the hard passages,—of which there are not a few,—and then we might have a more secure basis for translation. We expected such an edition in the series which has been so auspiciously opened with Professor Cook's edition of Cynewulf's *Christ*, but it seems to have been relegated to the Greek Kalends.

Professor Hall has adopted as the vehicle of his translation an approximate imitation of Old English rhythm, two accents to the half-line with alliteration in the words receiving the main stress, and he has carried out this alliteration more consistently than any other English translator. It is needless to say that I agree with him that this verse gives a better idea of the Old English rhythm than any other English verse does, but we cannot attain ideal correctness of rhythm, and we must never force the meaning to suit the alliteration. To express as closely as possible the exact sense of the passage must be the translator's aim, and if this cannot be effected without violating the Old English alliteration, then alliteration must go. I cannot agree with Mr. Frye on "The Translation of *Beowulf*" (in *Modern Language Notes*, XII, 1897) that blank verse gives the mere English reader a better idea of the *Beowulf* than any other verse, but I prefer the position of Professor Fulton "On Translating Anglo-Saxon Poetry" (in *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XIII, 1898),—a paper once read before this Association. We should remember Grein's criticism of Heyne's translation: "Eine tüchtige Uebersetzung, bei der nur leider die Wahl des Metrums (fünffüssige Jamben!) eine höchst verfehlte genannt werden muss." Any reader who will compare Grein's and Heyne's translations can judge of the matter for himself. It is true that I once favored the use of blank verse for such a translation *by a poet*, but I do not think that any of us who

have attempted the translation of *Beowulf* can lay claim to that appellation, except William Morris, and I shall state below my objections to his work. Did time permit, I should note some objections to Professor Hall's work also, for my copy is filled with marginal diacritics, as I read it very carefully and with great interest,—but fifteen minutes pass away very rapidly. I must, however, make one suggestion, that in a future edition the lines be numbered continuously from beginning to end, as in all editions of the poem, for the numbering of lines by cantos makes it very inconvenient for reference, and the convenience of the student should be regarded.

Our other contemporary translation, that by Professor Earle, entitled "The Deeds of Beowulf," is in prose, and to this there can be no objection, for a more exact idea of the contents of a poem can be gained from a prose than from a verse translation,—*pace* Mr. Stopford Brooke,—although naturally there is no question of rhythm. If we rule out prose for the translation of a poem, we must not only exclude three of the most recent translations of *Beowulf*, but the translations of the classics all adown the ages. Professor Earle's translation is provided with a useful Introduction, giving a brief view of the criticism of the poem, with much animadversion on Müllenhoff's *Innere Geschichte*, a synopsis of contents, and his own theory of the origin of the poem. As every one that handles the subject,—and especially our German friends,—seems to have a different theory of the origin of the poem, Professor Earle is entitled to his say, and whether we agree with his theory or not, we shall find his book a valuable addition to *Beowulf*-literature, and his large body of explanatory notes a useful aid in the interpretation of the text. Here too, if time permitted, I might comment on some passages of the translation, for I find my copy plentifully interspersed with marginal notations, but such critical comment has been ruled out, both from lack of

time and from unsuitability of subject for any but a company of Old English scholars, who alone could criticise the critic.¹

After the publication of Wyatt's edition of the poem in 1894, William Morris and himself issued from the expensive Kelmscott Press in 1895 their translation based on Wyatt's text, which they very rightly made more accessible in less expensive form in 1898. This work has no introduction, merely a brief synopsis of the argument, the translation, a glossary of names of persons and places, and a list of "some words not commonly used now." This is putting it mildly, for it is very doubtful whether some of them ever were used, and we feel almost like applying Grein's criticism of Ettmüller's translation, "Eine Uebersetzung, die bei ihren sonstigen groszen Verdiensten leider durch eine wahre Flut von Unwörtern fast unlesbar ist." The translation seems to be from two hands, for some parts of it read smoothly enough, and others poetically enough, but the translator has not always avoided alliteration in the fourth stress, indeed, he seems rather to have sought it, although it is a violation of Old English law. The prevalence also of the anapæstic measure causes too tripping a movement for the sober Old English style, and,—although it may be treason for a non-poet to criticise a poet,—it does not seem to me that Mr. Morris has attained here the beauty and accuracy of rhythm that characterize his "Sigurd the Volsung." However, some persons will read a translation of *Beowulf* that is ushered into the world by a poet, who might not read one that lacks such substantial backing, and therein I rejoice that *Beowulf* is made a more common possession of the public.

Some three years later, in 1901, we had the prose translation of Dr. J. R. Clark Hall, with introduction and notes,

¹ For the sake of correctness it may, however, be briefly remarked that in the notes on line 2157 an emendation attributed to Heyne was originally a conjecture of Grein's, which, though adopted in Heyne's fourth edition, was, as stated, dropped in the fifth, the first of the editions that received Socin's editorial care.

a bibliography,—into which has been tacitly incorporated another bibliography that I wot of,—an index of things, genealogical tables, an index of proper names, and other useful addenda, especially facsimiles of the manuscript, and pertinent illustrations. This translation is based on Wyatt's text, which is characterized as presenting very few divergences from Holder's, but, after brief statement of his own view, the author contents himself with referring for criticism to Arnold's "Notes on Beowulf," and the works of Sarrazin, Müllenhoff, and ten Brink. We still lack a thorough criticism in English of the many questions surrounding this ancient English poem, and here is another field for some one of our younger scholars.

Dr. Clark Hall has broken up the cantos by summaries of the contents every few lines, but it is a question whether this is an improvement, as it interrupts the reading of the text and greatly increases the bulk of the volume. He shows also a fondness for the use of Latinized words, as "dominion" for "people's land," and "appointed the effulgence of the sun and moon" for "set the sun and moon as lights," although Professor Earle too has here used "luminaries." It seems to me that the simplest native words are best for a translator of *Beowulf*, if one does not go to the excess, bordering on unintelligibility, of Mr. William Morris. Dr. Hall prints the episodes, as that of "Sigemund the Volsung" and that of "King Finn," in smaller type, which is an improvement.

This has been imitated in the latest published prose version of *Beowulf* during the present year, that of Professor C. B. Tinker, stated to have been made before the appearance of Dr. Hall's translation. It too has been made from Wyatt's text, and has but a short introductory note, a few explanatory notes, and an index of proper names, very brief. It seems to have been made for the use of students, as it is a small, handy, and inexpensive volume, but I think students of the poem will need more help than it gives, unless that is provided in the edition of the text, which, after all, is the

most suitable place for it. Truly there is now an *embarras de richesses* in translations of *Beowulf*, a very different state of affairs from that which existed twenty years ago, when we had only Arnold's text, with translation beneath the text, and Col. Lumsden's then recently published version in ballad-measure, a peculiarly unsuitable vehicle for such translation. For the sake of completeness I may add that there has been published this month [December, 1902] a reprint of the fourth edition (1900) of my own translation of twenty years ago, with some additions to the bibliography and a genealogy,—duly acknowledged,—taken from Max Förster's *Beowulf-Materialien*.

Perhaps I should mention also, for the sake of additional completeness, that we just missed another poetical translation last year (1901), for the author (as he tells us) had long meditated such a work, but on casting the materials over, he found them "lacking in qualities of human interest that are necessary to modern poetical narrative," so he substituted "*Beowulf*, a Poem by Samuel Harden Church," based on the adventures of Beowulf, and introducing a love *motif* between Beowulf and Freawaru :—

"A maid with golden hair and soft blue eye,
Who grew to frolic childhood, then to youth,
And danced with Beowulf in forest glades,
And romped beneath the spreading linden-trees ;"

so here we have that universal "quality of human interest" which the old bard unaccountably omitted and which is absolutely "necessary to modern poetical narrative." If Mr. Church had only given his poem another name, he might have avoided some mirth-provoking contrasts. Among "literal translations of the Saga" (to use his own words), the author mentions one by "Harrison and Sharp [!]" which I have been so unfortunate as not yet to have seen, although the edition of the poem by these writers is well known. But *Beowulf*-lore has not only provoked an original poem with that title ;

it has also invaded the lecture-field, for I received not long since a circular from a gentleman who desired to give to my non-existent school a talk on "Beowulf," along with Ulysses, King Arthur, and other heroes of olden time; so we translators of *Beowulf* are responsible for having our hero exalted to that pantheon which furnishes mythical adventures to beguile the tedium of the pedagogue's instruction.¹

¹ There should be added to this brief notice of English translations the German one of P. Hoffman, first published in 1893, and a second edition in 1900, a copy of which came to hand too late to be included in this paper. The author makes use of the Nibelungen-verse, although "in freer form," and he tells us that he has tried "to preserve the peculiarities of the original and to stick to the text as closely as possible." But this is not possible in the Nibelungen-verse any more than in rhyming ballad-measures. The "Fight at Finnsburg" is inserted in the episode of Finn, although the translator thinks it probably later than the "Beowulf." He mentions briefly the translations of Simrock, von Wolzogen, and Heyne, but says that those of "Grein, Holder [!], and Möller [!]," were not accessible to him, and he thinks that they are "*nicht sehr bekannt*." It is strange to find a German speaking of Grein's translation of "Beowulf" as "*nicht sehr bekannt*." The rhyming couplets and the Alexandrine movement of the verse do not remind us of "Beowulf," however accurate the translation may be in reproducing the ideas of the original. The author says that "since Wolzogen [1872] no one has had the courage to risk a new translation,"—that is, in German, for he ignores all English translations.

Since this paper was read, Professor Tinker's Doctor-thesis, "The Translations of Beowulf, a critical bibliography" (1903), has come to hand. It gives some account, with extracts and criticism, of all of the existing translations of "Beowulf," even partial ones and selections, from Sharon Turner and Thorkelin on. It will, therefore, prove very useful to the student, whether one always agrees with the criticisms or not. It was a work that deserved to be done, and it seems to have been well done. The criticism of Hoffman's translation may be specially noted as an example (pp. 99-103). The brief criticism of my own translation (pp. 83-87) takes exception to the rendering of certain words,—and doubtless these renderings might have been more exact,—and to the prosaic rhythm. I am well aware that the rhythm needs revision, as does the text also in certain passages, but, as stated above, until we have a consensus of scholars as to the text, it is useless to be continually altering a translation to try to keep pace with supposed improvements in the text of the poem. The author is right in saying that my volume "had a flattering reception,"—much more so than I anticipated,—and the continual call for successive reprints shows that it has proved useful to students.

It is time, however, to turn from *Beowulf* to translations of other Old English poetry during the past ten years. First in order of time we have a blank-verse translation of *Cynewulf's Christ* (1892) by Mr. Israel Gollancz on opposite pages from the text, a vicious method of printing if the text is to be used by students. It is no part of this paper to criticise texts, but suffice it to say in passing that Mr. Gollancz's text has been superseded by that of Professor Cook's very complete and excellent edition of *The Christ of Cynewulf* (1900), soon followed in the same year by the useful prose translation of Mr. C. H. Whitman, made from that text.¹ We are fortunate in now having this grand poem of Cynewulf in easily accessible, if not almost too elaborate, form, and a suitable translation to accompany it.

In 1892 came also Mr. Stopford Brooke's well-known "History of English Literature" (published in abridged form in 1898 as "English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest"), which contains fragments of translation from several Old English poems, the only complete ones, however, being the *Seafarer* and the *Wanderer*, of each of which we have two translations, one rhythmical in the text, and the other in blank verse in the Appendix. Mr. Brooke tells us that his chief difficulty was how to translate these poems, and then he makes the very venturesome remark: "Of all possible translations of poetry, a merely prose translation is the most inaccurate." Such a sweeping assertion is very risky. While fully agreeing with him that a translation should represent "the movement and the variety of the original verse," if we leave that out of account, we can certainly get

¹ I cannot, however, forbear here one critical remark. While Professor Cook has adopted in his text, line 40, Grein's happy conjecture *ge-æacnung* for MS. *gearnung*, which was followed by Gollancz, his Glossary assigns to *ge-æacnung* the meaning of *gearnung*, "reward, guerdon," or as Gollancz, "desert, meed," whereas Whitman has rightly translated it "conception," a reading that suits the passage much better. This oversight may be easily corrected, if it has not already been corrected since the publication of the work.

the ideas very accurately from a good prose translation. He rightly rules out "our existing rhyming metres:" he is more partial to blank verse, but thinks it "too stately . . . to represent the cantering movement of old English verse." I should never call that movement "cantering," and therefore should rule out an exclusively anapæstic movement as a representative of Old English rhythm. Mr. Brooke adopts a trochaic movement, two well-defined half-lines with either three or four accents to the half-line, so that we have 3:3, 3:4, 4:3, 4:4,—but this 4:4 movement is too much like "Hiawatha:"

"Hand in hand they went together
Through the woodland and the meadow."

Hiawatha is not Beowulf, even if Minnehaha might answer to Freawaru in Mr. Church's version. As already stated, I can find but two main accents to the half-line in Old English (except in the long lines), and any English rhythm that attempts to imitate that movement should have regard to this principle.

In 1895 Mr. Gollancz edited for the Early English Text Society the first part of the *Exeter Book*, containing the *Christ*, *Saint Guthlac*, *Azariah*, *The Phoenix*, *Saint Juliana*, *The Wanderer*, *The Endowments of Men*, and *A Father's Instruction*, each poem accompanied by a line-for-line translation on the opposite page, sometimes rhythmical but often very prosaic, and a comparison of this translation with his earlier translation of the *Christ* will show that he has purposely changed the blank verse rhythm to prose to secure greater accuracy of rendering. The second part of the *Exeter Book* was to have been ready in 1894, but we have looked for its publication in vain for several years. When this appears, and the edition of the *Vercelli Book*,—also projected by the Early English Text Society,—we shall have advanced a long way towards the attainment of our desires, the Cædmonian poems being then the only considerable body of Old English poetry still left since Thorpe that will await translation.

In 1899 appeared from the hands of Dr. R. K. Root a blank verse translation of the *Andrēas*, or "Legend of St. Andrew," with a brief descriptive introduction. We welcome every attempt to make the Old English poetry better known, but we have already heard Grein's opinion of Heyne's blank verse rendering of *Beowulf*, and I do not think that this verse is any more suitable for the saints' legends in the same Old English metre. If we compare Dr. Root's version with the later one of Professor Lesslie Hall, we must concede that the latter is more literal, to say the least. Of the strictly poetical merits of each I refrain from expressing an opinion, although in all blank verse renderings there is a tendency to eke out the line for the sake of the rhythm, and to accent articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and such-like light words, which accentuation grates harshly upon the ear, if it does not actually destroy the rhythm. Following chronological order I may be permitted to mention the second edition in 1901 of my own translations of the *Elene*, *Judith*, *Athelstan*, and *Byrhtnoth*, enlarged by the addition of the *Dream of the Rood*, which poem is translated entire for the first time, I believe, in English since Kemble.

The present year has seen the publication of two volumes of translations of Old English poems, the first, original, by Professor J. Lesslie Hall, containing *Judith*, *Phoenix*, *Maldon*, *Brunnanburh* and *Andrēas*, of which the *Phoenix* is a distinct addition to our existing store of Old English translations (though I cannot think that Professor Hall has succeeded as well in these as in his *Beowulf*); and the second volume by Professors Cook and Tinker, chiefly selections from already published translations, although some translations have been made expressly for this work by Professor Cook and his pupils, we infer, among others a blank verse translation of the *Dream of the Rood* by Mr. Lamotte Iddings. We should not quarrel with what we have, but we should have been more grateful if these scholars had given us original translations, by themselves or others, of all of these selections, even

if they might not have equalled those of Tennyson, the late Professor Henry Morley, and Lumsden; but doubtless the editors have designed only to popularize the Old English poems. There are some shorter pieces, however, that are additions to our present stock of translations, as the *Ruin*, the *Wife's Complaint*, the *Gnomic Verses*, the *Riddles*, the *Charms*, and a few others, and Professor Cook has supplied a prose translation of the *Phoenix*. I desire to make one suggestion to future translators, that, instead of duplicating existing translations of Old English poems, they set themselves to the task of translating those poems of which there is now no *accessible* English translation, for we cannot count the older translations of Kemble and Thorpe as generally accessible. In that event the wish with which this paper opened will soon be fulfilled, for much progress has been made during the past ten years.

In conclusion, I desire to notice briefly the various *media* used in translation. In the volume last mentioned we have prose, blank verse, ballad measures, imitative measures,—that is, measures imitative of the Old English rhythm with or without alliteration,—and some irregular verse, or, as it might be called, rhythmical prose. In remarks made above I have defended the use of prose, but I cannot consider it the best medium for the translation of poetry; the ballad-measures must be unhesitatingly rejected as producing on the ear a totally different rhythm from the Old English metre and being entirely too rapid in movement.

Professor Gummere some years ago (in *Amer. Journal of Philology*, VII, 1886), on "The Translation of Beowulf," showed the unfitness of blank verse for the translation of that poem; and a little later, in a paper read before this Association in 1890, which appeared in the *Publications* the next year (VI, 1891), on "The Translation of Anglo-Saxon Poetry," I attempted to show the kind of verse I thought most suitable for such translation, and I have seen no reason to change the views then expressed.

The discussion of the question was continued in 1897,—as noted above,—by Mr. Frye, favoring blank verse, and in 1898 by Professor Fulton, favoring a measure imitative of the Old English metre, in which he gave us a translation of *The Wanderer* as a specimen; so these two measures seem to hold the field at present, wherever a rhythmical translation is preferred to a prose one. Mr. Frye says: "The translation and the original should produce, each upon those to whom it directly addresses itself, essentially the same impression, and the coincidence of impression, if applied fairly and discreetly, will be found a very just test of the value of a translation;" and he proceeds to argue that this principle is fulfilled in blank verse because it "is our natural epic expression," and "is the line most susceptible of the constant variation indispensable in translating *Beowulf*;" therefore it "would seem theoretically to be the best medium for rendering *Beowulf*."

Professor Fulton, while conceding the correctness of Mr. Frye's principle, takes exception to his conclusion. He says: "No doubt a good poet might produce a very fine poem in blank verse out of the story of the *Beowulf*, but it would not be *Beowulf*. The heroic quality of such a *Beowulf* would be of a totally different kind from that of the original." (*Vide* for illustration the poem of Mr. Church mentioned above.) He then argues for the imitative measure and concludes that "A translation which does not seek to reproduce the measure as well as the matter of its original cannot, of course, give anything like a true and adequate idea of that original." When this discussion was first started, Professor Bright expressed the opinion that it was "too soon to say how Anglo-Saxon poetry should be translated." Has the time come yet for a more decided expression of opinion? Translations have multiplied, and doubtless there is a whole host of embryo translators just waiting to know what form of verse they should adopt, or whether they should stick to plain prose. Our latest translators, Professors Cook and Tinker, are very

comprehensive. They say: "It will be seen that the book does not represent any particular theory of translation to the exclusion of others. Indeed, in view of the fact that opinions on the best medium for the translation of poetry are so divergent, the attempt has been made to exhibit a variety of media." This is, indeed, very liberal; where all are so generously treated, no one has a right to complain. But I was never cut out for an agnostic. I want to know which is right. It may be that I may perpetrate in the future some more translations from Old English poetry. If I am right, I shall tread in the footsteps of the past; if I am wrong, I shall mend my ways.

Seriously speaking, will not some Old English scholar take up the subject and tell us what medium of translation makes upon his mind the impression nearest to that made by the original? This is essentially subjective, but if we can have a consensus of scholars agreeing upon any one medium, that must be taken as the standard, and variations from it must be regarded as the peculiar idiosyncrasies of the individual translators. In judging of the possibilities of an imitative measure, let not the critic confine his study to what has been done. Some one in the future may handle this measure much more skilfully than any one in the past has done, and we may approach much more closely to the impression made by the original. But whether we do or not, let us not grow weary in well-doing. Let it no longer be said that forty-five years after the publication of Grein's *Dichtungen der Angelsachsen*, we cannot yet point to its equal in English, we who claim this ancient poetry by right of direct, and not collateral, descent. The clouds are breaking, the skies are brightening, as this cursory review of the progress of the past ten years shows, and perhaps in ten years more there will not be left a fragment of Old English poetry to await a translator. The advance made in the study of Old English in the last twenty years has rendered this possible; the number of students has greatly increased, and it behooves them not to

hide their light under a bushel, but to set forward and help on the good work, obeying the injunction of our latest volume, *antiquam exquirite matrem*, and whether in ballad-measure or blank verse, in imitative measure or even plain prose, to do their part towards making the precious stores of Old English poetry generally accessible to all of English-speaking race.

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